

# Crisis of identity

## Cosatu faces paralysis

To fully understand recent events at the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) one needs to explore the tensions that have always existed between workerist and populist forces in the federation, writes **Melikaya Rubushe**.



The recent events at Cosatu have kept South Africans from all walks of life on their seats' edge as many sought to understand, explain and digest what stands most likely as the defining moment in the history of the federation post-1990. It is now public knowledge that Cosatu has suspended its general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, following allegations of inappropriate behaviour on his part. The allies of Vavi have condemned this as political conspiracy while those against him have stuck to the due procedure line. It must be stated that, in varying tones, there has always been focus on Cosatu's political outlook since the dawn of democracy in South Africa.

In his analysis of the 'economic freedom march' by the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League in 2011, Steven Friedman expressed frustration at how Cosatu seemed unable to make itself understood on where it stood regarding the march. Specifically, Friedman took issue with mixed messaging that seemed to be coming from the federation as its president, Sidumo Dhlamini, appeared to dismiss the march while the general secretary appeared to have some sympathy for the same. Correctly so, Friedman pointed out that this apparent confusion was not a case

of a mere crossing of wires, but a reflection of a deeper problem.

Cosatu had become so obsessed with ANC internal politics that it was losing focus on that which builds its strength, such as membership issues. It is quite telling that, at Cosatu's national congress last year, the secretariat report reflected on this very same issue. In what he termed a crisis of legitimacy, Vavi warned in the report that: 'Cosatu will not see [another] five years unless we change. We spend most of our time in battle against each other. If we don't stop and if we go to [the] Mangaung [ANC leadership conference in December] and fight each other we'll go to the 2014 elections in tatters. People will chase us away from their homes [when campaigning]'.

#### TOO CRITICAL OF ANC

The Vavi assertion immediately drew flak from some within Cosatu, the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) with Gwede Mantashe (ANC secretary general), Blade Nzimande (SACP general secretary) and Fikile Majola (general secretary of the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union) being quoted as having spoken sternly against the tone of Vavi's report. It would appear from the critics of the stance taken by both Vavi and Friedman that there appears to be a view held that by virtue of its alliance with the ruling party, Cosatu should be guarded in its assessment of the performance of its political allies so as to avoid being seen as too harsh.

Anyone who takes the time to read the history of South African trade unions will observe that the discussion on the implications of trade unions being actively involved in the affairs of national liberation organisation is not unique to Cosatu. The federation had to contend with the same criticism with critics pointing out that the involvement with national liberation politics brought the risks of the relegation of workers' interests to those of

nationalists and/or other class interests or groupings.

At the centre of all of these mischiefs is the unresolved issue of Cosatu's political outlook in relation to the status quo. This continues to haunt the federation much as was the case during the early years. Cosatu inherits this from her predecessor, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), which also had to contend with the same criticism following its decision to align with the Congress Movement in the 1950s.

Jeremy Baskin argues that even as the idea of a unified federation of independent unions was being mooted in the 1980s, the supporters had to deal with the very same challenge even though it would have been expressed in different tones. In *Striking Back*, Baskin expresses this puzzle as a contest between those who viewed popular politics suspiciously as petty bourgeois and those who favoured the political direction of the United Democratic Front (UDF), which insisted on unions participating in the national liberation politics.

In the same book, Baskin acknowledges that Cosatu launched with several key issues unresolved between the different streams of political thought. Whichever way one looked at things, Cosatu represented a compromise between the workerist and populist strands of political thought and so its survival was always going to be about the management of this tension, as confirmed by Baskin.

The challenge was always going to be about the extent to which Cosatu was able to manage this marriage of convenience between the two strands of political thought. While up to 2007 Cosatu had been able to maintain some semblance of independence, the Polokwane events had Cosatu firmly in the back pockets of not only the politics of the ANC, but specifically to a particular faction. Up until that moment, Cosatu had been a credible

voice of the working poor having led sustained campaigns against the neo-liberal policies of government, which had led to job losses as government went full steam with the privatisation of state assets in the period between 1996 and 2000.

#### IDEOLOGICAL TENSION

By 2005, however, this had changed and Cosatu reached a point in 2007 where they openly chose sides in the contest for ANC positions. Not only did they do this, they went as far as suggesting that one of the two competing groups within the ANC represented hope for the aspirations of the working class. Of course history has since shown this for the sham it was, hence the heightened tensions that have culminated in the events of the last few weeks resulting in the suspension of the Cosatu general secretary, the suspension of the president of the teachers' union, Thobile Ntola, and threats by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) to reconsider its participation in the Alliance.

Even a look at the role-players in the recent squabbles bears out the fact that this tension represents the reappearance of the pre-1985 fissures. Historically, Numsa and the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) are from a tradition that has always been sympathetic to the workerist doctrine while unions like the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) represented support for the populist strand of thought.

What the role-players in Cosatu should do is to take the time to remember those basic things that made that organisation the powerful force it grew to become. It would take a few moments before they recall what made unions like the NUM, Numsa and others as vibrant, militant and grounded as they were a few years before and immediately after the birth Cosatu. Quite a few of these come to mind even as one tries to imagine what it would take to restore Cosatu to the glory of its early days.



*Marching against e-tolls in Johannesburg.*

The most pressing issue is for Cosatu to sort out the practical implications of its declared ideological outlook. The federation's official documents are littered with socialist rhetoric with a number of resolutions committing to the cause for socialism. Similarly, there is the well-known commitment to a relationship with the ANC. These two have been a subject of discussion among many for years now without there ever being a clear settlement either way.

In the recent past Cosatu has had to defend itself against the conduct of the investment arms of its affiliates as well as that of its own like Kopano Ke Matla. Central to the controversy around these companies has been what many have concluded to be their bold adoption of a crudely capitalist character. In spite of these questions having been lingering since the mid-1990s, Cosatu has not really been able to reign in these companies and this has harmed the federation's socialist credentials.

Added to this is the federation's dismal failure to build a relationship with social movements. Despite having identified this as an area of weakness around 2003, Cosatu

has continued to adopt a sceptic posture when it comes to engaging with these, especially those that deal with the socio-economic ills of the post-1994 South Africa like landlessness, unemployment and others.

The most pressing challenge for Cosatu, however, is its relationship with the governing ANC. This is the same matter that is the obvious hint of the scheming around Vavi's future. Those protesting his suspension have linked his current woes to the perception that he is too critical of the ANC government. As pointed out earlier, those uncomfortable with Vavi's apparent militancy appear to expect that, purely by virtue of the political relationship, Cosatu should not openly disagree with its partner.

This tension continues to exist because the relationship between Cosatu and the ANC is defined, almost exclusively, on emotive historical terms. Sustaining the effectiveness of this approach is proving to be a difficult feat as the groundswell of protests around issues of service delivery, the ever rising cost of living (whether its e-tolls, electricity costs, municipal charges or fuel price) among the Cosatu constituency.

Equally pressing is the urgent need for Cosatu, and indeed all of its affiliates, to re-energise its internal democratic process. The alternative to this would be an organisation whose life is dominated by 'palace politics' rather than the best deal for the constituency. Strong internal democratic practices are the single most important feature to have secured the survival of democratic independent unions against the severe onslaught of the apartheid regime. It should not have been possible for the federation to have had a few elected officials decide on their own on a matter as important as the fate of its general secretary. Even worse was the alleged decision of the same small group to ask representatives of provinces to leave the venue as the matter was being thrashed out.

Until Cosatu resolves this crisis of identity, it runs the risk of facing a more serious issue of, much like Vavi's report to the Congress warned, the crisis of legitimacy. <sup>18</sup>

*Melikaya Rubushe works for the Eastern Cape provincial government and holds a masters' degree in Social Science from Rhodes University.*